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DE RUEHUB #0120/01 0371442

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

R 061442Z FEB 08

FM USINT HAVANA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2825

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/05/2018

TAGS: ECON PGOV PINR PREL PHUM CU

SUBJECT: CUBA DISSIDENT GROUP FLAMUR: POLITICAL MOVEMENT OR CHARITABLE ORGANIZATION

Classified By: COM: Michael E. Parmly: For reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Dissident group FLAMUR (Latin American Federation of Rural Women) seeks to represent the interests of rural women in Cuba. The group receives guidance and other supplies from support groups in the U.S. During 2007, it drafted a petition calling for the GOC to do away with the dual currency system and collected more than 10,000 signatures. In some ways, however, FLAMUR seems closer to an NGO or charity organization than a political opposition movement, something which has made it difficult for FLAMUR to gain acceptance as a mainstream dissident group. End Summary.

The Organization

¶2. (C) Founded in 1997, in the midst of the Cuban "special period" or economic depression, the "Federacion Latinoamericana de Mujeres Rurales" (FLAMUR; Latin American Federation of Rural Women) is a group that seeks to represent the interests of rural women in Cuba. Its founder, Magdelivia Hidalgo, emigrated to the U.S. and now supports the organization from Miami. According to its president, Maura Iset Gonzalez Jurquet, FLAMUR currently has 2,700 members spread throughout all of Cuba's provinces. Members elect one delegate from each province, who, in turn, elect the organization's national leadership.

Mission:

¶3. (C) FLAMUR's main mission has been to support rural Cubans, particularly women, in fulfilling basic economic needs. They deliver needed items, teach workshops, and create awareness of women's issues and rights.

Environment:

¶4. (C) While most Cubans in the countryside can maintain a minimum level of subsistence (mainly because they live in remote locations where it is easier to grow some crops for personal consumption outside the control of the GOC), they are still extremely poor and lack many essentials. In many remote areas, access to the bodegas (food rationing

distribution points) is limited by distance and lack of transportation. According to FLAMUR spokesperson Belinda Salas, food rationing portions are larger in urban locations like Havana than in remote rural locations, where rationed items such as detergent, cooking oil, and soap are often insufficient or missing. Beyond the few crops and animals they may manage to raise for themselves, rural Cubans have no purchasing power. This situation remains unchanged even if rations are supplemented by a minimal government salary in the local currency (less than USD 16 per month). FLAMUR sees its mission as working to alleviate this sad economic reality for many rural Cubans.

Operationally dependent on Cuban-American largesse:

¶15. (C) FLAMUR tells us that it receives guidance, money, publications, medicines and other supplies through their representative in the U.S., Magdelivia Hidalgo, and from various other sources, mainly Frank Hernandez Trujillo and Omar Lopez Montenegro of the Cuban-American Foundation. It should be mentioned that this group has sent supplies to FLAMUR through USINT. It is not clear whether USAID funding has gone to FLAMUR. Both money and supplies for FLAMUR are smuggled into Cuba through various means. According to FLAMUR president Gonzalez, money is always sent in dollars. (Comment: In Cuba, exchanging U.S. dollars implies an additional loss of 10% compared to any other currency because of a GOC tax that is levied exclusively on the dollar. In providing cash, some other hard currencies, such as euros, would be more efficient. End Comment.) In return, FLAMUR sends reports and photos of their activities on the island so they can be published outside the island. Some can be seen on their website: www.flamurcuba.org.

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One currency campaign:

¶16. (C) Because of the dual currency system, whenever average Cubans buy something in convertible Cuban pesos (CUCs) -- which include most imported products and just about anything of quality -- their purchasing power evaporates. According to spokesperson Salas, FLAMUR began a campaign called "Con la misma moneda" (With the same currency) in 2006, when members of the organization tried to buy a piece of equipment for a boy suffering from asthma but the piece was only sold in CUCs rather than in the Cuban national pesos (CUPs; 1 CUC = 24 CUPs) in which all official salaries are paid in Cuba. During 2007, FLAMUR members drafted a petition calling for the GOC to do away with the dual currency system and collected a total of 10,738 signatures.

¶17. (C) FLAMUR members marched to the National Assembly and handed over the signatures to Cuban officials on November 21, 2007. Some members were detained briefly by Cuban authorities before and after the event. The GOC has yet to respond to the petition, although under Cuban law it must do so within 90 days. According to FLAMUR leaders, if the GOC does not respond, the next step would be to submit another 5,000 signatures they say they have already collected.

¶18. (C) On January 25, the FLAMUR held a press conference to release the results of a survey showing that more than 97% out of the 7,800 respondents support their campaign. Once again, some members were detained briefly by Cuban authorities before and after the event.

Is the FLAMUR campaign genuine?

¶19. (C) FLAMUR has encountered difficulties gaining acceptance as a mainstream dissident group. In private, prominent dissidents Martha Beatriz Roque and Vladimiro Roca voiced their deep misgivings about FLAMUR, saying that the

group is nowhere as big as it claims and only exist to receive money from "Miami." Vladimiro Roca, who was consulted by FLAMUR on how to fashion their petition, was quick to distance himself from the group by saying he had only given them some pointers on one occasion. Other dissidents, such as Oswaldo Paya and Oscar Espinosa Chepe, were less critical but did express their doubts about how the group could amass so many signatures so fast, given that Paya's Varela Project took six months and involved "more than one hundred people working around the clock."

¶10. (C) Comment: Thus far, FLAMUR seems closer to an NGO or charity organization in Cuba than a political opposition movement. FLAMUR's membership strength as well as the authenticity of its signature drive remain in question. The organization's single-currency campaign is a clever platform with which any Cuban can identify his/her many economic wants, particularly their lack of purchasing power, but FLAMUR is sorely lacking sound economic and technical advice.

For instance, the recently published survey is of no statistical value -- the questions are heavily skewed towards a particular response -- and none of the members understands what realistically would be required to unify the currency, even if the GOC really wanted to do it. FLAMUR members definitely provide assistance to many rural Cubans to the extent they can. The extent of their efforts to provide assistance is strongly correlated to the level of help coming from Miami. When speaking to FLAMUR president Gonzalez the topic of money and supplies from Miami -- and the dire need to keep them coming -- kept resurfacing. Post would appreciate any guidance the Department could provide on official funds that may be going to FLAMUR.

¶11. (C) Comment Continued. Whatever the numerical strength of the organization, FLAMUR's continued existence, and especially its more recent notoriety based on the single currency campaign, is an example of the tendency of Cubans of all stripes to speak up for themselves and their rights. FLAMUR, in addition, is one of the only groups on the island with the potential of reaching the otherwise--mainly ignored--rural and Afro-Cuban population. As such, it merits

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consideration to receive USG financial support.
PARMLY